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ZNY CCCCC ZZH
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FM AMEMBASSY DHAKA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7309
INFO RUEHLM/AMEMBASSY COLOMBO PRIORITY 8588
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 2318
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 9828
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0800
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL KOLKATA PRIORITY 1430

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 000930

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/02/2018

TAGS: PTER KDEM BG IN

SUBJECT: INDIAN OFFICIAL SAYS SECURITY ISSUES UPPERMOST IN RELATIONS WITH BANGLADESH

Classified By: Ambassador James F. Moriarty. Reasons: 1.4 (b) and (d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A senior Indian Ministry of External Affairs official expressed a broad array of security concerns over neighboring Bangladesh in a meeting with the visiting U.S. Ambassador to Bangladesh on August 25. The official, Joint Secretary T. S. Tirumurthi, said the USG had not been tough enough in demanding more rigorous counterterrorism efforts from Dhaka. He also questioned U.S. engagement with the Islamist Jamaat-e-Islami of Bangladesh (JIB) political party. In response, the Ambassador detailed a number of USG measures to deny space to terrorists in Bangladesh, and said that engagement with JIB was designed to steer it along a positive, non-violent path. He also suggested that India adopt regional approaches to security issues.

INDIA'S SECURITY CONCERN WITH BANGLADESH

¶2. (C) At a meeting in New Delhi with Ambassador James F. Moriarty, Tirumurthi said he was bothered that the USG had given Bangladesh "practically a clean chit" on terrorism. Tirumurthi noted that security was the single most important issue for India in its dealings with neighboring Bangladesh. At least some terrorist bombings in India could be traced "very clearly" to Bangladesh, which was both a staging point and safe haven for Islamic extremists. He also asked about the USG motivation for engaging the Islamist JIB political party, which is a major player in Bangladeshi politics and was a junior member of the ruling alliance led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party from 2001-2006.

¶3. (C) Ambassador Moriarty responded that the USG pursued a policy of promoting democracy, development and denial of space for terrorists in Bangladesh. He said the Embassy was working with Bangladesh to strengthen its counterterrorism programs, particularly after recent USG assessments had found deep flaws in sea and land border security. The Ambassador said he did not believe Bangladesh intelligence agencies supported terrorism, as was claimed by some Indians; instead, he argued that the agencies were focused on other issues such as domestic politics. He also said the U.S. Embassy maintained contact with JIB to steer it in a positive, non-violent direction. While he acknowledged that some of its members had gone on to be involved in extremist organizations, the JIB itself to date continued to preach non-violence and participate in the democratic process.

INDIAN, BANGLADESHI OFFICIALS ALSO STRESS THE POSITIVE

¶ 4. (C) Tirumurthi noted that both sides recently had handed over criminals to the other as unilateral goodwill gestures (Note: Tirumurthi added that the criminals returned from Bangladesh were of "zero value" to India, where they were not facing charges. Still, he said the exchange was important for showing Bangladeshis their government was not afraid to deal with India. End note.) Despite friction over security issues, Bangladesh High Commissioner to India Liaquat Ali Choudhury told Ambassador Moriarty, in a separate conversation, relations with India were "moving in the right direction." In early September, the Home Secretaries from both countries held their annual meeting in Dhaka to discuss bilateral issues; a week earlier the Bangladesh Rifles and Indian Border Security Force also convened a regular working conference to discuss border issues despite recent gunfights. (Note: Shootouts between the two border forces often stem from disputes over the spoils of cattle smuggling. End note.)

¶ 5. (C) Tirumurthi said Bangladesh's prosperity was of critical importance to India. He agreed with Ambassador Moriarty that Bangladesh had great potential to develop vast energy resources, and he said that India would be the biggest consumer of Bangladesh coal no matter who owned the mines. (Note: Nahida Rahman Shumona, Councillor and Head of Chancery at the Bangladesh Deputy High Commission for Bangladesh in Kolkata, subsequently argued in a meeting with PolOff that non-tariff barriers prevented a wide range of Bangladeshi products from cosmetics to pharmaceuticals from reaching Indian markets. She also said Bangladeshi television channels were not available in West Bengal even though Indian channels were allowed in Bangladesh. End note.)

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BANGLADESHI POLITICS AND INDIA

¶ 6. (C) Tirumurthi expressed optimism that "things are falling in place" for Parliamentary elections in Bangladesh in December. (Note: His comments came before news of the imminent release from jail on bail of Tarique Rahman, the son of former Prime Minister Khaleda Zia who is charged in multiple cases of corruption. Tirumurthi said the return to politics of Tarique, who is viewed by many as the heir-apparent to his mother's leadership of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, would be a worst-case scenario for Bangladesh. End note.) Tirumurthi also said Bangladesh Army Chief General Moeen Uddin Ahmed, a powerful supporter of the Caretaker Government, had advanced bilateral relations. He expressed hope that the general would continue to play a role in the "system," although he added that India did not want to see a "Pakistan-type situation" in which a military leader came to power outside the democratic framework.

¶ 7. (C) Choudhury admitted that one stumbling block to improving bilateral relations was the inferior quality of Bangladesh's civil service. "The next administration will take some time," he said. "The Bangladesh civil service has become politicized in the last 10 years and people coming to the top now are not very well qualified. We may not be in a position to give the right advice to the next government." He added that failure to recruit new civil servants for the past three years had exacerbated the problem.

CONCLUSION: ROOM FOR REGIONAL APPROACH?

¶ 8. (C) Ambassador Moriarty's meetings with senior Indian and Bangladeshi officials in New Delhi revealed continued tension over security issues and the need to further develop economic and political ties. While bilateral mechanisms such as regular border talks and meetings between senior civil servants keep relations from boiling over, there clearly is

room for regional approaches as well. High Commissioner Choudhury said that the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation had come up with good ideas for concerted action that were not being implemented by sluggish bureaucracies.

Tirumurthi agreed with Ambassador Moriarty that regional solutions to security and other border issues could be pursued. Embassy Dhaka will work with its U.S. Embassy counterparts in India and throughout South Asia to follow up on the Regional Security Initiative conference in New Delhi on August 27, which made pursuing regional approaches to countering terrorism its top priority.

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